

# Social Construction: Big-G Grounding, Small-g Realization

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## Abstract

The goal of this paper is to make headway on a metaphysics of social construction. In recent work (forthcoming), I've argued that social construction should be understood in terms of metaphysical grounding. However, I agree with grounding skeptics like Wilson (2014) that bare claims about what grounds what are insufficient for capturing, with fine enough grain, metaphysical dependence structures. To that end, I develop a view on which the social construction of human social kinds (e.g., race) is a kind of *realization* relation. Social kinds, I argue, are multiply realizable kinds. I depart from Wilson by further arguing that an appeal to grounding is not otiose when it comes to social construction. Social construction, I claim, belongs to the “big-G” Grounding genus, but it is the specific “small-g” relation of realization at work in cases of human kind social construction.

*While discussions of realization have nearly always been discussions of the realization of mental properties, it is important to remember that the application of the notion is much broader than this.*

—Sydney Shoemaker (2007: 5)

## 1. Introduction

The notion of social construction is central to many projects in feminist theory, race theory, and the social sciences more generally. Unfortunately, the notion not always defined, analyzed, or rigorously characterized in these projects. Social construction is, at base, a notion of determination, viz. determination by social phenomenon. Hence, social construction ought to have a place in discussions of metaphysical dependence in general.<sup>1</sup> Recently (forthcoming), I've argued that social construction should be analyzed in terms of metaphysical ‘grounding.’<sup>2</sup> The present effort aims to address Jessica Wilson’s (2014) critique of grounding with respect to social construction.<sup>3</sup> In that critique, she argues that a primitive and generic notion of grounding, what she calls “big-G” Grounding (‘Grounding’ henceforth), is both uninformative and unhelpful for understanding the metaphysical structure of reality. Instead, she recommends that metaphysicians work to identify and employ various specific “small-g” dependence relations in their theorizing. I agree that we ought to

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<sup>1</sup> See Haslanger (2003), Ásta (2013), Diaz-Leon (2013), Witt (2011), Epstein (2013, 2014, 2015, 2016), Schaffer (forthcoming), and my (forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> See Epstein (2013, 2014, 2015, 2016) and Schaffer (forthcoming) for grounding approaches to social construction. The notion of grounding has become a key tool with which metaphysicians have attempted to limn the metaphysical structure of reality. ‘Grounding,’ refers to a non-causal or metaphysical way in which certain features of reality are what they are *in virtue of* other features of reality. Grounded items are derivative from, dependent upon, and explained by what they are grounded in. Grounding is directional in the sense that grounds (non-causally) give rise to what they ground. Importantly, grounding indicates ontological priority: grounds are more ontologically fundamental than that which they ground. Some grounding theorists take grounding to impose a partial ordering across levels of reality insofar as it is asymmetric, irreflexive, and transitive. For discussion of grounding see Fine (2001, 2012), Schaffer (2009, 2016a), Audi (2012), Rosen (2010), Raven (2012), Correia and Schnieder (2012), Trogdon (2013a), and Bliss and Trogdon (2014).

<sup>3</sup> Also see Koslicki (2015) for another influential critique of Grounding.

go beyond bare claims about what Grounds what. To that end, I develop an account of social construction as a *realization* relation. For a subject S to be socially constructed as of a human social kind K (e.g., race) is for the S's Kness to be realized by certain social factors. In particular, social construction is a relation of functional realization that satisfies a subset condition on powers. Human social kinds, on my account, are functionally defined multiply realizable kinds. However, I disagree with Wilson about the uselessness of a notion of Grounding. On my view, Grounding is a genus of which there are species, among them realization. I argue that Grounding is needed to fix the direction of ontological priority when it comes to items in social reality and further that Wilson's own primitive fundamentality framework does not rule out this role for Grounding to play in articulating the structure of social reality. Social construction, in short, is (big-G) Grounding and (small-g) realization.

Here's how the paper will unfold. In section 2 I characterize my approach to Grounding and social construction and in section 3 I present Wilson's critique of Grounding. Then in section 4 I develop the account of social construction as a realization relation. In section 5 argue that there is work for Grounding to do with respect to social ontology.

## 2. Social Construction as (big-G) Grounding

On the view defended in my (forthcoming), social construction should be understood in terms of Grounding. Specifically, I suggested that we should endorse the following analysis of the social construction of a subject S belonging to a certain human social kind K:

*Social Construction as Grounding (SCG):* S is non-causally socially constructed as a K iff the fact that S is a K is at least partly Grounded in particular features of social reality.

I argued that we should bring social construction into the Grounding framework because (i) it would function to unify social construction within the more general discussions of the metaphysical structure of reality; (ii) the central commitments of social constructionists can be perspicuously and rigorously stated in the Grounding framework; (iii) a variety of objections to analyzing social construction in terms of Grounding can be adequately answered.<sup>4</sup>

Elsewhere (2014), I've adopted a pluralist approach to Grounding on which it is a genus of metaphysical (non-causal) dependence and explanation under which fall various specific metaphysical dependence relations.<sup>5</sup> What is common to all species of Grounding, I claimed, is that (i) they are asymmetric and irreflexive<sup>6</sup> and (ii) that there is some sort of (non-causal) directed action, e.g., determination, from the more fundamental grounds to the less fundamental grounded item. Any relation is a Grounding relation, if it holds between an item that non-causally generates or gives rise to (in some particular fashion) another item. Insofar as realizers asymmetrically and irreflexively give rise to what they realize by determining the instantiation of the realized property, realization is a

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<sup>4</sup> I considered objections from Barnes (2014), Mikkola (2015), and Wilson (2014).

<sup>5</sup> See Berker (ms.), Fine (2012), Schaffer (2016b), and Richardson (ms.) for other pluralist approaches to grounding. See Koslicki (2015: II.2) and Wilson (2014: 576) for concerns about grounding pluralism. See Raven (forthcoming) for response to Koslicki and Wilson.

<sup>6</sup> These are controversial commitments, but I don't have space to defend these claims here. Fortunately, the argument of the rest of the paper won't rely upon these commitments. See Wilson (2014: 570ff.) on why grounding relations need not be irreflexive. I don't include transitivity on the list of formal properties since I don't think truthmaking, qua Grounding species, is transitive. See my (2014). I also want to remain neutral about whether grounds always necessitate what they ground. See Trogon (2013b) Leuenberger (2014), and Skiles (2014) for discussion.

species of Grounding. Social construction, as a realization relation, is a species of the genus Grounding.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. Wilson's Critique

In Wilson's (2014) critique, she argues that there is 'no work' for a theory of Grounding to do that can't be done with metaphysical tools already in hand. Her argument is that appeal to a primitive and generic notion of Grounding is uninformative and unhelpful. Bare Grounding claims such as 'X Grounds Y' are uninformative because they give us no answer to whether Grounded items exist, whether they are reducible or irreducible to that which Grounds them, or whether Grounded items are distinctively causally efficacious (2014: 541ff.). In sum, bare Grounding claims do not tell us exactly *how* Grounded items stand to their Grounds. Appeal to a *sui generis* primitive notion of Grounding, she argues, is unhelpful because Grounding is too course-grained to appropriately characterize the various cases of metaphysical dependence (2014: 548ff.).<sup>8</sup> To account for these cases, we are driven to identify the specific metaphysical dependence relations—small-g grounding relations—that hold in each case. Among the small-g relations, Wilson includes type and token identity, functional realization, classical mereological parthood, causal composition, set membership, proper subset, functional realization, and the determinate/determinable relation (2014: 552ff.). Wilson argues that once we've identified the small-g relation operative in a case of metaphysical dependence, then the appeal to a primitive notion of Grounding is superfluous.<sup>9</sup>

Grounding theorists like Schaffer (2016b) and Cameron (2016), among others, have disputed Wilson's claim that Grounding claims are uninformative, unhelpful, and ultimately superfluous.<sup>10</sup> However, they have also attempted to glean important insights from Wilson's critique. Cameron (2016: 368) writes, "simply saying 'X grounds Y' and ending one's account is not satisfying. One must say something about how X grounds Y; as Wilson would have it, which small g grounding relation is it that takes us from X to Y?" Schaffer (2016b) draws two lessons from Wilson's critique: (1) bare Grounding claims must be supplemented with specific rules mapping Grounds to what they Ground and (2) accounts of Grounding need to be embedded in a formal system with unified rules that provide useful generalizations about the kind of dependence at issue. Along with Cameron and Schaffer, I want to resist Wilson's conclusion that Grounding is superseded by small-g grounding relations, while acknowledging that bare Grounding claims need to be supplemented with an account of how grounds Ground what they do. Thus, in what follows, I identify the small-g grounding relation—viz. realization—operative in instances of social construction and argue that Wilson has not shown that Grounding is rendered superfluous by recognizing this small-g grounding relation. I take this endeavor to be a necessary step—beyond analyzing social construction in terms of Grounding—in articulating a metaphysics of social construction. But I recognize that further steps are likely needed, which outstrip what can be accomplished here, e.g., applying Schaffer's two Wilson-lessons to social construction.

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<sup>7</sup> The arguments given below will not depend upon this particular conception of Grounding pluralism, only on there being some small-g relations that are also Grounding relations. Moreover, I am not convinced that all of the small-g relations on Wilson's list are species of Grounding. For example, I do not think that token identity or type identity are Grounding relations.

<sup>8</sup> Koslicki (2015) also argues that Grounding is too course-grained to account for various examples of metaphysical dependence. However, Koslicki does not think that Wilson's small-g relations are metaphysical dependence relations (2015: fn. 2).

<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that, strictly speaking, Wilson thinks that the small-g relations need to be supplemented with a primitive notion of *fundamentality*. Below I'll discuss Wilson's primitive fundamentality framework.

<sup>10</sup> Also see Berker (ms.) and Raven (forthcoming).

#### 4. Social Construction as (small-g) Realization

Realization is familiar in the philosophy of mind. Some have used the notion to articulate a non-reductive connection between mental features and their underlying physical features in a physicalist friendly way. As a gloss, for a kind  $K$  to be realized by a property  $P$  is for the instantiation of  $P$  to ‘bring about’ the instantiation of  $K$  by  $P$ ’s being a *way* of being a  $K$ . A kind  $K$  is *multiply* realizable, then, if suitably different properties could bring about the instantiation of a token of  $K$ ; the different realizers of  $K$  are different *ways* in which a thing can be a  $K$ .<sup>11</sup> Realization, as I’ll use it, is a many-one relation that holds between properties. However, I take it that when a kind  $K$  is realized by properties  $P_1, \dots, P_n$  a relation of realization holds between a token of  $K$  and tokens of  $P_1, \dots, P_n$ .<sup>12</sup> In the case I’ll consider, realizers are properties of the individual bearing the realized property. Hence, social construction will be regarded as a case of what Gillett (2002; 2003) calls ‘flat’ realization.<sup>13</sup> The realization relation is a synchronic, asymmetrical, non-causal determination relation. Realizers (or at least ‘total’ realizers, of which more anon) necessitate, i.e., are metaphysically sufficient for, what they realize. Human social kinds will be construed as multiply realizable functional kinds that inherit their social powers from their realizers. In the final portion of the section, I’ll discuss what sorts of differences between putative realizers of a kind  $K$  are required for  $K$  to be multiply realizable and the role that constitution might have in the construction of human social kinds.

To apply this conception of realization to the construction of a subject’s social identity, let’s consider Sally Haslanger’s account of being racialized:

A group is *racialized* iff<sub>df</sub> its members are socially positioned as subordinate or privileged along some dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.), and the group is ‘marked’ as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of ancestral links to a certain geographical region. (2000: 44)

Applied to a particular individual  $S$  who is black, the social construction of  $S$ ’s blackness consists in  $S$ ’s (token) blackness being realized, say, by the instantiation of the following properties by  $S$ :

- (i) Being subordinated economically;
- (ii) Having the morphological features  $F_1, \dots, F_n$  presumed to be evidence of ancestral links to (certain parts of) Africa;
- (iii) Being a target for subordination because of having  $F_1, \dots, F_n$ .<sup>14</sup>

How exactly is  $S$ ’s blackness realized by these properties? Many constructionists think that social kinds are defined relationally, i.e., in terms of their members’ relationships to certain aspects of

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Clapp (2001), Funkhouser (2007a), Haug (2010: 325).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Shoemaker (2007: 3). This view suggests that we recognize at least two realization relations, e.g., what Baysan (2015) calls ‘property-realization’ and ‘instance-realization.’

<sup>13</sup> However, I entertain the possibility of the ‘dimensioned’ realization of social kinds below when I consider the role of social context in social kind realization. ‘Dimensioned’ realization occurs when the realized and realizer properties belong to different objects.

<sup>14</sup> It’s important to note that not just any arbitrary property of  $S$ , e.g., wearing a hat, will be among the realizers for *being black*. We can appeal to the definition of the kind to set limits on its possible realizers. Moreover, Grounding is taken to be non-monotonic: if  $[p]$  grounds  $[q]$  then it is not the case that for any arbitrary  $[r]$ ,  $[p]$ ,  $[r]$  ground  $[q]$ . As a species of Grounding, realization inherits this feature of non-monotonicity. Thanks to Chris Tucker for raising this issue.

social reality.<sup>15</sup> Members of social kinds, more specifically, occupy distinctive social positions within broad social structures that are created by repeated patterns of human social interaction.<sup>16</sup> The social positions in these structures are regulated by norms for the appropriate behavior of their occupants. Some think that these structures are inherently hierarchical.<sup>17</sup> If we understand social kinds as social positions that play a certain role in a social structure, then we can think of them similar to the way we think of functionally defined mental states. According to functionalists about the mind, psychological kinds, like pain, are higher-order properties that are defined in terms of the functional role that they play in the causal network of psychological states. Pain is realized by the underlying physical state that plays the functional role characteristic of pain. Similarly, social kinds may be considered higher-order properties that are defined in terms of the social positions that their members occupy in a social structure. For an individual S and a social kind K, S's Kness is realized by the instantiation of properties through which S occupies a social position characteristic of Ks. Or: S's occupying a social position characteristic of Ks consists in S's instantiating these realizer properties. More concretely, if *being black* is defined in terms of occupying a subordinate social position on the basis of morphological features associated with African ancestry, then S's particular blackness is realized by the instantiation of properties (i), (ii), and (iii), through which S occupies a social position characteristic of *being black*.

### *The Subset Condition on Realization*

Non-reductive physicalists develop conceptions of realization on which mental properties are distinct from and irreducible to physical properties that realize them.<sup>18</sup> One such conception is the so-called “subset” theory of realization, which seeks to avoid problematic causal overdetermination of realized properties.<sup>19</sup> On this view, X realizes Y only if the powers bestowed by having Y are a proper subset of the powers bestowed by having X. A power, roughly, is a (manifested or unmanifested) capacity to do something, to bring about a certain effect. Typically, proponents of this view, focusing on mental-physical realization, hold that the relevant powers are *causal* powers. To apply the subset strategy to the realization of social kinds, it will be necessary to include in our account of kind realization what Åsa Andersson (2007) calls “social powers.” According to Andersson, a social power is a capacity, which depends for its existence upon social phenomena, to bring about a certain outcome. Social powers may be collectively endowed and recognized—what John Searle calls “deontic powers,” which are rights, obligations and permissions, e.g., the power to legally drive a car (1995; 2010). They may also “arise as unnoticed byproducts of existing social phenomenon” (Thomasson 2003: 276, fn. 8) or take the form of normative ideals adopted or imposed on an individual.<sup>20</sup> When applied to the realization of social kinds (RSK), the subset condition on realization is:

(RSK) Properties  $P_1, \dots, P_n$  realize a social kind K only if the social powers bestowed by K are a (non-empty) proper subset of the powers (social or otherwise) bestowed

<sup>15</sup> Haslanger (2000: 44), Witt (2011), Mills (1998: xv), Root (2002), Sundstrom (2002), and MacKinnon (1989).

<sup>16</sup> Haslanger (1993) and Barnes (2014, forthcoming).

<sup>17</sup> Haslanger (2000), Mills (1997: 11), and Taylor (2013: 89).

<sup>18</sup> Wilson (2011), Pereboom and Kornblith (1992), and Pereboom (2001, 2011).

<sup>19</sup> Wilson (1999; 2011), Shoemaker (1981, 2001, 2011), Clapp (2001: 130).

<sup>20</sup> See Jenkins (diss.) for further clarification on deontic powers and Andersson (2007) for a theory of different forms of social power.

by  $P_1, \dots, P_n$ .<sup>21</sup>

To illustrate RSK, in certain contexts, belonging to the kind *being black* bestows upon its members certain social powers. For example, it may bestow upon its members the ability to make use of affirmative action programs, to have a certain capacity to access affordable housing, or place restrictions on how one relates to the police.<sup>22</sup> On the subset view, these social powers are a subset of the powers bestowed by the instantiation of the properties realizing *being black*, e.g., properties such as *being economically subordinated*, *having skin of such-and-such a color*, or *having Kenyan ancestry*. Since the powers bestowed by *being black* are a subset of its realizers' powers, there will be some powers bestowed by the realizer properties that are not members of the set of powers bestowed by the realized kind *being black*. For example, having skin with substantial levels of melanin (brown pigment) in it bestows on its bearer a certain power to protect the skin from damaging UV rays of the sun. This power, despite being a power bestowed by a realizer property of *being black* is not among the powers bestowed by *being black* itself. Why? A light-skinned black person may not have that power despite being black. This is due to the fact that *being black* is multiply realizable (more on this below) by different properties pertaining to skin pigmentation.<sup>23</sup>

### *Some Upshots*

One upshot of RSK is that it offers a straightforward way in which social kinds are real, despite being socially constructed. Social kinds are (at least partly) realized by contingent and alterable social features, yet they do not ontologically reduce to their realizers. Realized kinds have their own “distinctive power profile” (Wilson 2011: 129) since their set of powers is not identical to the set of powers of their realizers. Insofar as properties are individuated by their powers, realizers are not identical to what they realize. Moreover, realized social kinds exhibit causal autonomy from their realizers. The distinctive power profile of realized social kinds contains powers that are uniquely relevant to the production of certain effects (cf. Wilson 2011: 129). Suppose a person who is black makes use of an affirmative action program. It is the power profile of the kind *being black* that is relevant to the production of the effect (i.e., of making use of the affirmative action program) rather than the power profile(s) of its realizer(s). Wilson holds that this feature of realized properties shows that they make a *distinct* causal contribution to the relevant effects and hence establishes their

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<sup>21</sup> In RSK, ' $P_1, \dots, P_n$ ' and ' $K$ ' refer to property types. However, when  $P_1, \dots, P_n$  realize  $K$ , there are tokens of  $P_1, \dots, P_n$  and  $K$  such that the token social powers of a  $K$ -token are a non-empty proper subset of the token powers of  $P_1, \dots, P_n$ -tokens.

<sup>22</sup> Jenkins (diss. chp 4) argues that belonging to certain social kinds constitutes an “ontic injustice.” Such injustice involves the wrongful deprivation of deontic powers on the basis of being classified as of particular social kinds.

<sup>23</sup> Pereboom (2011: 134) objects to the subset view, arguing that the token powers of a realized property cannot be *literally* identical to a subset of the token powers of the realizer property, due to cases of multiple realization (either merely possible or over time). If a token property  $M$  is realized by a token property  $P_1$  at a time and then later by  $P_2$ , the token powers of  $M$  cannot be identical to a subset of the token powers of  $P_1$  or  $P_2$  given that the token powers of  $P_1$  and  $P_2$  are not identical. In response, it is not clear that this objection applies to the realization of social kinds. It is an open question whether any particular token of a social kind  $K$  can have multiple realizers over time (although I take it that different instances of  $K$  can have different realizers). It may be that as realizer properties change, so does the token of  $K$ . At any rate, I haven't adopted the subset view as an account of every case of realization, but only in a modified form tailored to the realization of social kinds. Second, Pereboom's argument makes a controversial assumption that property *tokens* are multiply realizable. But Polger and Shapiro argue “property instances are not multiply realized. This seems self-evident. Instances are not repeatable. If something is not repeatable, then it is not repeatable in different ways. So property instances are simply not the right sorts of things to be multiply realized” (2008: 214). It is open to the subset theorist to hold that property types, but not property tokens are multiply realizable. See Wilson (2011: 140) for a similar response.

causal autonomy from their realizers (2011: 129). Other subset theorists go further and argue that this feature shows that the realized property is the *only* cause for the relevant effect.<sup>24</sup> Either way, the causal autonomy of the realized property is secured. Insofar as the causal autonomy of something is an indication of its reality, we have reason to hold that realized social kinds are real though socially constructed.

Another upshot of the account is that it offers resources for responding to an objection sometimes directed at social constructionist accounts of social kinds. The objection is that some accounts of social kinds problematically exclude certain persons from the kind because those persons fail to instantiate a property required for kind membership by the account. Haslanger, for example, faces the objection that her account of *being a woman* excludes female persons who are not systematically subordinated from being women.<sup>25</sup> On the present account, realized properties are understood in terms of powers they bestow on their bearers. Powers, being dispositional, need not be manifested to be had. Hence, the failure to *actually* manifest the powers of a property that (helps) realize a social kind is not, by itself, grounds for exclusion from the kind. As long as one has the *disposition* to manifest the power in certain circumstances, one may meet the conditions for kind membership. More generally, as long as one has the power to play the functional role characteristic of the social kind, one may belong to the kind. So in response to the above objection, Haslanger could say that one need not actually and presently be subordinated in order to be a woman. One satisfies this condition of her account as long as one has features that *would* result in one's regularly experiencing sex-based subordination in certain circumstances.<sup>26</sup>

#### 'Core' vs. 'Total' Realizers

To our account I want to add a distinction, drawn by Sydney Shoemaker (1981) and Robert Wilson (2001), between 'core' and 'total' realizations. Core realizations, says Funkhouser, "make the most significant or at least salient contributions to bringing about their realized kinds" (2007b: 312). However, core realizations for a kind may not be metaphysically sufficient for the instantiation of K. Core realizers may only realize K in certain contexts. For instance, a mental state may be realized by specific neural activity, but it only does so in the context of the functioning of the central nervous system. Total realizations, on the other hand, include the core realizer being situated in the appropriate context or system. That context serves as the supplemental conditions for the instantiation of K. Total realizations of K are metaphysically sufficient for the instantiation of K.

This distinction is helpful for articulating an important feature of social kinds, viz. their contextual sensitivity. To get a sense of how constructionists think about the contextual sensitivity of social kinds, consider Michael Root's claim that race does not "travel." He writes, "Some men who are black in New Orleans now would have been octoroons there some years ago or would be white in Brazil today" (2000: S631–632). An implication of this view is that the features in virtue of which one belongs to a certain social kind K in one context may not be sufficient to qualify one as a member of K in another context. Hence, the instantiation of the properties that realize *being black* in the US may not be sufficient for the realization of *being black* in Brazil. Core realizers for K, we saw, are the realizers that are the most central and salient to the production of K. In our example, the properties corresponding to (i), (ii), and (iii) are the core realizers for S's *blackness*. But these properties only realize *being black* in certain social contexts. We get the total realization of *being black*

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<sup>24</sup> Shoemaker (2001: 31) and Yablo (1992: 274).

<sup>25</sup> See Haslanger (2000: 46). Also see Jenkins (2016) who argues that Haslanger's account problematically excludes certain trans women from being women.

<sup>26</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for recognizing this upshot of the account.

by including the operative social structure, including the relevant economic, political, historical, ideological, etc. features of the context. The reason that social kinds like race may not “travel” from context to context is that their core realizers may differ from context to context.<sup>27</sup>

### *Multiple Realizability*

Another feature of our account is the *multiple* realizability of social kinds. In terms of our subset account RSK, a social kind K is multiply realizable just in case there is (or could be) more than one property (or properties) whose associated powers are (or could be) the superset of which the social powers associated with K are (or could be) a non-empty proper subset. Similar to the way in which pain may be realized in importantly different kinds of physiology, social kinds may be realized by importantly different features of social reality. Suppose, for example, that Haslanger (2000) is right that being a woman is in part a matter of being subordinated in some fashion on the basis of one’s (real or imagined) female body. Then one’s being a woman could be (partly) realized by being subordinated economically while another’s womanhood could be (partly) realized by being subordinated sexually.

The multiple realizability of social kinds guards against their reduction to particular social features. Because being a K can be realized by different social features of different individuals, the kind K is not identical to any particular realizers. Moreover, the multiple realizability of social kinds also affords us a way of accommodating differences between members of the same social kind. Feminists have long warned against ‘essentializing’ women by identifying a set of particular properties that are necessary and sufficient for being a woman. Admittedly, our framework ‘essentializes’ social kinds by defining them in terms of their functional roles. All women, for example, are women in virtue of having properties that together allow their bearer to occupy a certain kind of social role, i.e., the one characteristic of women. However, the account can avoid what is nefarious about social kind essentialism. If the social position or role definitional of a kind is characterized broadly enough, then there are no particular set of properties required to belong to the kind. The properties that realize a social kind may exhibit significant diversity. Hence, different people can be women, for instance, in virtue of importantly different factors.<sup>28</sup>

### *Two Final Issues*

I’ll close this section by addressing two issues that arise in debates over realization, and their application to social construction. First, there is a debate about which sorts of differences between members of a kind qualify the kind as multiply realizable.<sup>29</sup> According to Shapiro (2004), only differences in the properties that are relevant to the functioning of the kind in its distinctive role qualify a kind as multiply realizable. The waiter’s corkscrew and the double-lever corkscrew, for instance, count as different realizations of the kind *corkscrew*, whereas a red waiter’s corkscrew and a

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<sup>27</sup> The relation between core and total social realizers is a complicated matter. See Root (2000), Mallon (2004), and my (forthcoming). For a related approach to social facts and their contexts, see Epstein (2014, 2015) who distinguishes between ‘grounds’ and ‘anchors’ of social facts. If we opt to include properties of the subject’s social context among the realizers of a social kind, then social construction can be considered a case of ‘dimensioned’ realization because some of the realizer properties are not properties of the subject realizing the social kind. See Gillett (2002; 2003) on ‘flat’ and ‘dimensioned’ realization.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Stone (2007: chp. 5). Context may play an important role in determining what properties serve as realizers for a social kind. There may be different realizers for a kind K in different contexts. See my (forthcoming) for discussion of contextually-(in)sensitive social kinds.

<sup>29</sup> See Shapiro (2004), Funkhouser (2007a), Wilson (2009), Haug (2010), and Yablo (1992) for discussion.



blue waiter's corkscrew do not. The realizers for the kinds *being black* that we've been considering meet Shapiro's standard for multiple realizability. Different instances of *being black* are realized by properties, e.g., being subordinated economically, socially, or having a morphologies associated with different regions of Africa, that constitute different ways of occupying the social position characteristic of *being black*. By meeting Shapiro's 'conservative' standard for multiple realizability, the account ipso facto meets Funkhouser's (2007a) 'liberal' standard.<sup>30</sup>

Second, some realization theorists hold that realizers, in some sense, 'constitute' what they realize.<sup>31</sup> Constitution is not a part of the subset account of social construction I've offered here, for two reasons. First, I've already characterized the connection between powers of the realized and powers of the realizers as identity rather than constitution, which is typically not taken to entail identity. Second, 'constitution' is a term of art that requires an account of its own. I'd prefer, all things being equal, not to introduce another relation beyond realization and the subset relation (and Grounding, as we'll see below). Moreover, on some accounts of constitution the relation is analyzed in terms of still further relations. For example, Pereboom (2011: 135ff.) analyzes constitution in terms of a primitive 'made up of' relation. Furthermore, the extant accounts of constitution are often accounts of *material* constitution, which are designed to apply to material objects.<sup>32</sup> The application of constitution to social kinds is not straightforward given that social kinds are not material objects. Pereboom's brief attempt (2011: 141) to extend his notion of constitution to property instances is lacking in details. It appeals to the idea that one property instance could be "materially coincident" with another, which is not obviously applicable to social kinds. None of this is to say that an appropriate conception of constitution could not be formulated. If one did, the relative merits of a constitution account and a realization account would have to be debated.

## 5. Work for (Big-G) Grounding

The above account of small-g social construction was given in response to Wilson's insight that we need to go beyond bare claims about what Grounds what and identify the exact connection between grounds and the grounded. In this section, I defend the posit of Grounding against Wilson's claim that it is superfluous.

A number of Grounding enthusiasts think that Grounding is needed to 'fix the direction of ontological priority' between the relata of the small-g relations, something which the latter may not always do on their own. Fine, for example, says, "there mere holding of these other [small-g] relationships may not in general be sufficient to establish a relationship of ground."<sup>33</sup> On my Grounding pluralism, some of the small-g relations are species of the genus Grounding. One function of Grounding is to account for why one relatum of small-g relations is more fundamental than the other.<sup>34</sup> Because Grounding is an asymmetrical non-causal giving rise to or generation relation, knowing that one of its species, say, realization, obtains suffices to establish that realizers are prior to what they realize. Grounding, moreover, is taken to be, or at least to undergird, a

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<sup>30</sup> According to Funkhouser, we have a case of multiple realizability whenever we have "sameness of type through any differences in the (lower-level) conditions that give rise to instances of that type" (2007a: 467).

<sup>31</sup> See Funkhouser (2007b), Kim (1993), Shoemaker (1981), Pereboom and Kornblith (1992), Pereboom (2002; 2011) for discussion. Wilson (2001) argues against a constitution constraint for realization.

<sup>32</sup> Pereboom (2011) and Baker (2007).

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Wilson (2014: 558). Also see Schaffer (2016a and b), Cameron (2016), Raven (forthcoming), and Berker (ms.) for discussion on this point.

<sup>34</sup> N.B. one need not endorse this version of Grounding pluralism to appreciate this point.

distinctively metaphysical form of explanation.<sup>35</sup> When X Grounds Y, X explains Y. Because such explanations are directed from ground to grounded, so too are the small-g relations in which this explanatory connection is present. Insofar as Grounding is (or ungrounds) this explanatory connection, its presence with a small-g relation entails that one relatum (e.g., the realizer) is more fundamental than the other (e.g., the realized).<sup>36</sup>

We can go further, however, and explain why the mere obtaining of a realization relation—as understood in the previous section—does not suffice to fix the direction of priority between realizers and what they realize.<sup>37</sup> That is, we can show that the characteristic features of realization, i.e., its differentia, do not by themselves explain why realizers are more fundamental than what they realize. Consider the various features we’ve attributed to realization: (i) realizers are sufficient for, i.e., asymmetrically necessitate, what they realize, (ii) realizers play a functional role characteristic of what they realize, and (iii) the token powers of the realized are a proper subset of the token powers of its realizers. None of these features of the realization relation entails that realizers are more fundamental than what they realize. First, the necessitation of the realized by its realizers is insufficient to establish direction of priority because asymmetrical necessitation can hold between entities that do not depend upon each other, e.g., the existence of my left arm necessitates that 3 is greater than 2 (but not vice versa) but the latter does not depend upon the former.<sup>38</sup>

Second, that a realizer plays the role characteristic of what they realize does not, by itself, entail that the former is ontologically prior to the latter. The bare notion of ‘playing a role,’ i.e., serving some function in a system, does not import ontological priority. Realized properties are often said to be ‘higher-order’ properties and realizers ‘lower-order’ properties. According to Shoemaker, a higher-order property is “one that, necessarily, something has just in case it has some property or other (other than the property in question) satisfying that condition” (2007: 15). If that’s right, and I think it is quite plausible, then there is nothing in the notion of being a higher-order property *in itself* that it is less fundamental than its realizer. For the bi-conditional ‘just in case’ in Shoemaker’s definition is symmetrical and so does not indicate ontological priority.

Finally, the proper subset relation that holds between token powers of the realized and the realizer does not fix a direction of priority. The proper subset relation is a merely formal, set-theoretical relation; it is not inherently directional. For we can know that {a} is a proper subset of {a, b} without knowing whether {a} depends upon {a, b}, whether {a, b} depends upon {a}, or neither.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> There is a debate about the connection between Grounding and explanation. Some think that Grounding (or as they would say ‘Ground’) is metaphysical explanation, while others hold that Grounding ‘backs’ or ‘underwrites’ explanatory relations. See Bliss and Trogon (2016: section 4) for an overview.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Raven (forthcoming: sections 2.3.2.2 and 4.3). On this score, the Grounding framework has an explanatory advantage over a mere stipulation that realizers are always more fundamental than what they realize.

<sup>37</sup> Wilson herself suggests that there is a case to be made for priority in either direction when it comes to realization: “A functionalist atomist might maintain that bodies are prior to hands on grounds that a body’s function can be implemented in the absence of a hand, but not vice versa. Alternatively, a functionalist atomist might maintain that hands are prior to bodies, on grounds that a body’s function sensitively depends on the functions of its parts, including its hands” (2014: 565). Neither of these positions seems to me to establish priority in either direction. In the first case, merely modal asymmetry of the implementation of the body’s function and the existence of a hand is insufficient to establish priority. In the second case, there is a bald assertion of priority but no reason is given to think that the body’s function does depend on the function of hands (and certainly not on the function of any particular hand).

<sup>38</sup> It is widely held now that mere modal connections between entities fail to establish ontological priority. See Fine (1995), Schaffer (2009), Tahko and Lowe (2015), and Koslicki (2012; 2013).

<sup>39</sup> Some subset theorists, e.g., Shoemaker (2001: 80) and Clapp (2001), conceive of the relation between powers of the realized and its realizer as a part-whole relation. Even if that’s right, the subset relation would not by itself entail priority since the obtaining of a part-whole relation does not settle whether the parts or the whole are prior to one another.

There are other conceptions of realization on which the obtaining of realization does fix the direction of priority. In the two prominent examples of this, however, realization fixes the direction of priority only because it is classified as or analyzed in terms of primitive notions very similar to Grounding. On Gillett's (2010) view, realization is a kind of "making-up" relation, which is an asymmetric and transitive relation of "non-causal determination." Gillett doesn't define the making-up relation but does think there are a plurality of such relations. Pereboom (2011) defines a notion of constitution that is very similar to the conception of realization adopted here. For him, constitution is partly defined in terms of the relation of "being made up of" (2011: 139). This relation, he says, "is unanalyzable and primitive" but that it is asymmetric and irreflexive and holds between the less fundamental and more fundamental (2011: 138).<sup>40</sup> Gillett's 'making-up' and Pereboom's 'being made up of' relation(s) may not be identical to Grounding, but they are very similar. Most importantly, they are similar with respect to their function in theorizing about dependence, viz. they serve to unify a collection of dependence relations and/or fix the direction of ontological priority of the relata of certain relations.<sup>41 42</sup>

### 5.1 Wilson's Primitive Fundamentality Framework and Social Ontology

Wilson acknowledges that the obtaining of small-g relations does not always fix the direction of priority between their relata. In some cases, she thinks, "additional facts/assumptions are need for a specific metaphysical relation to serve as a grounding relation." But she denies that these facts/assumptions "crucially involve an appeal to Grounding" (2014: 558). Wilson's rival posit is a primitive notion of what serves as fundamental: "the fundamental is, well, *fundamental*," she writes, "entities in a fundamental base play a role analogous to axioms in a theory...the fundamental should not be metaphysically defined in *any* other terms, whether these be positive or negative" (2014: 560).<sup>43</sup> Wilson's framework is meant to handle two kinds of cases: first, where one relatum is fundamental and the other non-fundamental (2014: 559-563) and second, where both relata are non-fundamental (2014: 563-566). In the first case, the direction of priority is fixed simply by one relatum of the small-g relation being (among the) fundamental. Social reality, nearly all agree, is non-fundamental. Socially constructed phenomena are dependent upon other social phenomena, and hence are derivative even in social reality. So the issue of priority relations in social reality is not of the first kind of case, but rather the second, i.e., direction of priority among what is non-fundamental. Wilson's recommendation for fixing the direction of priority among what is non-fundamental is to employ the standard metaphysical methodology:

On my view, the direction of priority between non-fundamenta is not assumed to follow just from the (small-g) facts about what is fundamental coupled with facts about how non-

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<sup>40</sup> Baker's notion of constitution establishes the direction of priority, but in the *opposite* direction that we are interested in: "The constituted thing has ontological priority over its constitutor" (2007: 166).

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Bennett's (2011, forthcoming) discussion of 'building' relation(s).

<sup>42</sup> Sometimes we do know that the realizer is prior to what it realizes. But what explains this will be something other than the mere fact that a realization relation obtains. In the case of the neural realization of pain, for example, we think that the neural state is more fundamental than pain because we assume that the biological is more fundamental than the mental, in general. In this case, what indicates the direction of priority is in the nature of the relata (in addition of certain other assumptions), not the obtaining of realization. However, I don't think that appeal to the natures of the relata will always help fix the direction of priority (pace Wilson (2016)). I discuss this below with respect to social reality.

<sup>43</sup> It's important to note that Wilson is not suggesting that positing an *absolutely* fundamental base, in addition to whatever small-g relations run up from that base, is sufficient to establish the direction of priority. She thinks that sometimes identifying a non-fundamental base that is *treated as* fundamental with respect to some set of non-fundamenta can help fix the direction of priority (2014: fn. 64; 2016: 197).

fundamenta stand to fundamenta...Rather, what emerges from attention to metaphysical methodology is that relative fundamentality is a matter of suppositions/facts about what is fundamental and how the non-fundamental small-g depends on the non-fundamental, along with (not general principles, but) suppositions/facts about the natures of the non-fundamenta and how (via one or other small-g relation) the non-fundamenta stand to one another. (2016: 200)

My general concern about Wilson's position is this: because she offers no general principle or specific procedure for fixing direction of priority among what is non-fundamental, she cannot guarantee in advance of considering the specific assumptions or facts of a particular case that no appeal to Grounding will ever be needed.<sup>44</sup> In the remainder of this section, I'll focus on how the primitive fundamentality framework might account for the direction of priority of small-g relations in social reality. I'll argue that Wilson has not shown that an appeal to Grounding will not or cannot figure in such an account.

Consider a social kind like *being a woman*. On the account given above, *being a woman* is realized by properties through which the individual who bears them occupies a social position characteristic of women; the powers bestowed by *being a woman* are a proper subset of the powers bestowed by its realizer properties. If the mere obtaining of a realization relation does not fix the direction of priority between *being a woman* and its realizers, as I argued above that it does not, then there is an open question about whether *being a woman* is more fundamental than its realizers or vice versa or neither. Social constructionists would say that *being a woman* is derivative from its realizers. A 'traditionalist,' on the other hand, might say that *being a woman* is more fundamental than its realizers: a person's being a woman is prior to (and perhaps is taken to help justify) the social arrangements in which women figure.

In order for the social constructionist to fix the direction of priority from the realizers to the realized social kind, Wilson recommends that the social constructionist develop her account of *being a woman* "in terms sensitive, somehow or other, to which goings-on are considered fundamental" (2014: 564). How do we decide what should be considered fundamental with regard to this debate? In a footnote Wilson says,

A non-fundamental base may be treated as fundamental if the archeology, so to speak, of the non-fundamental base is irrelevant to investigations into the dependence relations at issue. So, for example, the entities treated by fundamental physics might serve as a fundamental base for higher-level broadly scientific phenomena, even if the physical entities are non-fundamental relative to some deeper level of reality. (2014: fn. 64)

If we take the inquiry into social kinds to be part of the social sciences, then social kinds are "higher-level broadly scientific phenomena." In that case, the "entities treated by fundamental physics" would serve as this base, even if they are not absolutely fundamental in reality. But the entities of fundamental physics, whether absolutely fundamental or not, are irrelevant to debates about the nature and structure of social reality. Treating the micro-physical as fundamental would not decide, or even be evidence for, which features of social reality depend upon each other. Hence, they will not likely play a role in fixing the direction of priority in the case at hand. A base closer in relative

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<sup>44</sup> This is a somewhat different concern than Schaffer's (2016: 158ff.). Schaffer argues that Wilson's framework is impoverished because it provides no general principles, and hence no guidance, for fixing the direction of relative fundamentality.

fundamentality to social reality will need to be identified. I'm willing to grant, however, that some such considered-as-fundamental base can be identified.<sup>45</sup>

Suppose then the social constructionist develops her conception of *being a woman* in terms 'sensitive to' whatever this considered-as-fundamental base turns out to be. It's important to notice that, for many social constructionists, the immediate grounds for social kinds are not themselves features of this considered-as-fundamental base. That is, the immediate grounds for social kinds are not themselves fundamental even in social reality. Social constructionists like Haslanger (2000) and Witt (2011) think that social kinds depend upon complex (perhaps hierarchical) social structures. These structures, in turn, are dependent upon patterns of human behavior and thought, and these perhaps on further, more fundamental social grounds.<sup>46</sup> If that's right, then social kinds like *being a woman* stand at a distance removed (i.e., by a chain of small-g relations) from the considered-as-fundamental base for social reality. So the direction of priority in our case cannot be fixed simply by directly connecting the considered-as-fundamental base to the social kind by way of some small-g relation(s).

In order to fix the direction of priority between *being a woman* and its realizers, we will have to figure out, in this particular case, "how the non-fundamental small-g *depends* on the non-fundamental" (emphasis added 2016: 200). But Wilson admits that small-g relations do not always function as grounding relations (2014: 566; 569). Her framework, moreover, provides no general principles regarding when a small-g relation functions as a grounding relation: all we can do is make explicit what "assumptions are guiding our claims that one or another of these [small-g relations] is, in a given case, operating as a grounding relation (or not)" (2016: 201). Because there are no such principles in Wilson's framework, Grounding may have an entry point into the account of how *being a woman* is posterior to its realizers (and other aspects of social reality).

Consider Raven's (forthcoming: 2.3.2.2) critique of Wilson's view. Raven notes that in a number of places, Wilson appeals to an unexplained notion of dependence when discussing the standard metaphysical methodology for fixing the direction of priority.<sup>47</sup> He argues that an appeal to Grounding (or as he says, 'Ground') may be required to account for the acyclical nature of the dependence in these cases. Some forms of dependence, e.g., existential dependence, allow for cycles of dependence: X existentially depends upon Y and Y existentially depends upon X. But genuine dependence/priority should not admit of such cycles. The Grounding theorists might justify the prohibition against cycles by appealing to Grounding as (underlying) the non-causal explanatory connection between the relata: one relatum is prior to the other because the former non-causally explains the latter. Raven's point generalizes. An appeal to Grounding may be required whenever we establish the direction of priority for small-g relations by tracing the explanatory connections from the derivative item back to the considered-as-fundamental base. Indeed, it seems plausible that the social constructionist's case for the derivativeness of *being a woman* will proceed by appealing to the explanatory connections between that social kind, its realizers, the wider social context, and the considered-as-fundamental base.<sup>48</sup> Without further argument from Wilson, I cannot see that her methodology can preclude this role for Grounding in advance.

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<sup>45</sup> Such a base is likely to emerge from the debates between those who think people, their actions, and intentional states are the foundations of social reality (e.g., Searle (2005; 2010)) and those who think the foundations are richer (e.g., Epstein (2015)).

<sup>46</sup> See Barnes (forthcoming) for discussion of realism about these structures.

<sup>47</sup> E.g., "Suppose that both my hand *depends* on my body, or vice versa? One thing we might say is that, as fusions of the Many, both my body and my hand *depend* upon the many but neither *metaphysically depends* on the other per se" (emphasis added 2014: 564). Also see (2014: 565-6) and (2016: 201).

<sup>48</sup> And by noting the poverty of explanations of *being a woman* in terms of, say, anatomy alone.

Wilson also suggests in the (2016: 200) passage quoted above that in order to fix the direction of priority of a small-g relation, we may need to know something about the nature of its relata. Suppose we come to know the nature of *being a woman*. To be a woman, say, is to occupy a certain social position characterized by being subordinated in some fashion on the basis of one's perceived sex characteristics (cf. Haslanger 2000). Merely providing a definition of something, does not tell us anything about what it does or does not depend upon. The further assumption that definienda depend upon their definientia is needed to establish the direction of priority. But now the nature of this dependence becomes an open question. Wilson cannot, without begging the question, assume in advance that explicating this dependence will not involve appeal to Grounding.<sup>49</sup> It might also be supposed that it is in the nature of social kinds to be socially constructed. But again, we cannot assume in advance that characterizing the nature of social construction will not involve appeal to Grounding, at least not without begging the question against the arguments in Epstein (2015), Schaffer (forthcoming), and my (forthcoming).

In sum, Wilson assures us that no appeal to Grounding will be needed for fixing the direction of priority among non-fundamenta. But her framework includes no general principles governing how the direction of priority is to be fixed in each case. Consequently, there is no principled reason to think that an appeal to Grounding is unnecessary in any particular case. So I don't think Wilson has made good on her assurance that Grounding will not play any role in fixing the direction of priority regarding, for example, socially constructed kinds like *being a woman*. Moreover, I've argued that we can analyze the (non-causal) social construction of social identities in terms of a (small-g) realization relation. This account offers a way to explain exactly how social identities are grounded and to explain their existential and causal status. However, the pluralist framework I've adopted also accounts for an important role that Grounding has when it comes to the metaphysics of social construction, viz. fixing the direction of priority of small-g relations in social reality. Social construction is (big-G) Grounding and (small-g) realization.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Rosen (2015), Correia (2013) Carnino (2015), and Fine (1995, 2001, 2012, 2015) consider the relation between essence and Grounding. Also see Koslicki (2012; 2013) for discussion of essence and dependence.

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